

## CLAIMS

1. A method of processing postal items, which method consists, during a first pass for sorting the items, in taking (12) a digital picture of a postal item, in  
5 deriving (15) from said picture a digital fingerprint (V-ID) which is a logic identifier for the item, and in storing the fingerprint of the item in a memory in correspondence with data about the item, and consists, during a second pass for sorting the items, in taking  
10 again (51) a digital picture of a current mail item, in deriving (52) from said image a digital fingerprint for the current item, and in searching the fingerprints recorded in the first sorting pass for a match with the fingerprint of the current item in order to retrieve the  
15 data about the item by association;

said method being characterized in that:

during the first sorting pass, said method further consists, in the memory, in associating (16) the fingerprints of the successive items with corresponding  
20 chronological serial numbers (SN); and

during the second sorting pass, for a series of successive item fingerprints for which matches have been obtained with fingerprints recorded in the memory in the first sorting pass, said method further consists in  
25 retrieving (61) a series (S1, S2) of corresponding chronological serial numbers, in computing (62, 65) an estimated chronological serial number for a current item from said series of chronological serial numbers, and in searching (63) for a match with the fingerprint of the  
30 current item on the basis of the estimated chronological serial number.

2. A method according to claim 1, in which the computation of the estimated chronological serial number  
35 consists in a linear approximation.

3. A method according to claim 2, in which two  
chronological serial numbers are computed (65) by linear  
approximation on the basis of two series of successive  
item fingerprints, and a distance between the two  
5 computed chronological serial numbers is measured.
4. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 3, in  
which the search for a match is performed on the  
fingerprints recorded in the first sorting pass in an  
10 exploration space centered around the fingerprint  
associated with a computed chronological serial number.
5. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 4, in  
which the postal items are directed to the sorting outlet  
15 bins of a sorting machine and in which the chronological  
order is the order in which the items are loaded into the  
sorting outlet bins.
6. A method according to any one of claims 1 to 5, in  
20 which the chronological serial number is constituted by  
the juxtaposition of a sorting center number, of a  
sorting machine number, of a sorting outlet bin number,  
and of a chronological index.
- 25 7. A machine for sorting postal items that is arranged to  
implement the method according to any preceding claim.